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If They Could Only Talk

“The statues walked,” Easter Islanders say. Archaeologists are still trying to figure out how—and whether their story is a cautionary tale of environmental disaster or a celebration of human ingenuity.

BY **HANNAH BLOCH, SPENCER MILLSAP, AND FERNANDO G. BAPTISTA**

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On a winter night last June, José Antonio Tuki, a 30-year-old artist on Easter Island, did one of the things he loves best: He left his one-room home on the southwest coast and hiked north across the island to Anakena beach. Legend has it the earliest Polynesian settlers hauled their canoes ashore at Anakena a thousand years ago or so, after navigating more than a thousand miles of open Pacific. Under the same moon and stars Tuki sat on the sand and gazed directly before him at the colossal human statues—the *moai*. Carved centuries ago from volcanic tuff, they're believed to embody the deified spirits of ancestors.

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Sleepless roosters crowed; stray dogs barked. A frigid wind gusted in from Antarctica, making Tuki shiver. He's a Rapanui, an indigenous Polynesian resident of Rapa Nui, as the locals call Easter Island; his own ancestors probably helped carve some of the hundreds of statues that stud the island's grassy hills and jagged coasts. At Anakena seven potbellied moai stand at attention on a 52-foot-long stone platform—backs to the Pacific, arms at their sides, heads capped with tall *pukao* of red scoria, another volcanic rock. They watch over this remote island from a remote age, but when Tuki stares at their faces, he feels a surge of connection. "It's something strange and energetic," he says. "This is something produced from my culture. It's Rapanui." He shakes his head. "How did they do it?"

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Easter Island covers just 63 square miles. It lies 2,150 miles west of South America and 1,300 miles east of Pitcairn, its nearest inhabited neighbor.

After it was settled, it remained isolated for centuries. All the energy and resources that went into the moai—which range in height from four to 33 feet and in weight to more than 80 tons—came from the island itself. Yet when Dutch explorers landed on Easter Sunday in 1722, they met a Stone Age culture. The moai were carved with stone tools, mostly in a single quarry, then transported without draft animals or wheels to massive stone platforms, or *ahu*, up to 11 miles away. Tuki’s question—how did they do it?—has vexed legions of visitors in the past half century.



Their backs to the Pacific, 15 restored moai stand watch at Ahu Tongariki, the largest of Easter Island's ceremonial stone platforms. Rapanui artisans carved the moai centuries ago from volcanic rock at a quarry a mile away. By the 19th century all of Easter's moai had be... [Read More](#)

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But lately the moai have been drawn into a larger debate, one that opposes two distinct visions of Easter Island's past—and of humanity in general. The first, eloquently expounded by Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond, presents the island as a cautionary parable: the most extreme case of a society wantonly destroying itself by wrecking its environment. Can the whole planet, Diamond asks, avoid the same fate? In the other view, the ancient Rapanui are uplifting emblems of human resilience and ingenuity—one example being their ability to walk giant statues upright across miles of uneven terrain.

When the Polynesian settlers arrived at Rapa Nui, they had been at sea for weeks in open canoes. There were probably only a few dozen of them. Nowadays 12 flights arrive every week from Chile, Peru, and Tahiti, and in 2011 those planes delivered 50,000 tourists, ten times the island's population. Just three decades ago, cars, electricity, and phone service were scarce; now Hanga Roa, the only town, buzzes with Internet cafés, bars, and dance clubs, and cars and pickup trucks clog the streets on Saturday nights. Wealthy tourists drop a thousand dollars a night at the

poshest of scores of hotels. A Birkenstock shop caters to footsore ramblers. “The island is not an island anymore,” says Kara Pate, 40, a Rapanui sculptor. She’s married to a German she met here 23 years ago.

Chile annexed Easter Island in 1888, but until 1953 it allowed a Scottish company to manage the island as a giant sheep ranch. The sheep ranged freely, while the Rapanui were penned into Hanga Roa. In 1964 they revolted, later obtaining Chilean citizenship and the right to elect their own mayor.



Chilean newlyweds in festive paint and feathers (at right) celebrate marriage Rapanui style. Nearly two-thirds of the 50,000 visitors to the island in 2011 were from Chile.

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Ambivalence toward *el conti* (the continent) runs high. Easter Islanders depend on Chile for fuel and daily air shipments of food. They speak Spanish and go to the mainland for higher education. Meanwhile, Chilean migrants, lured in part by the island's income tax exemption, gladly take jobs that Rapanui spurn. "A Rapanui will say, What, you think I'm going to wash dishes?" says Beno Atán, a 27-year-old tour guide and a native himself. Though many Rapanui have married mainlanders, some worry their culture is being diluted. The population is now around 5,000, nearly double what it was 20 years ago, and fewer than half the people are Rapanui.

Just about every job on Easter Island depends on tourism. "Without it," says Mahina Lucero Teao, head of the tourism chamber, "everyone would be starving on the island." The mayor, Luz Zasso Paoa, says, "Our patrimony is the base of our economy. You're not here for us, but for that patrimony." That is, for the moai.



Tourists diving on Easter Island's reef encounter a fake moai, made for a 1994 Hollywood movie and then sunk offshore. The reef is healthy, though it is overfished. Tuna and salmon are imported, primarily for tourists.

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Thor Heyerdahl, the Norwegian ethnographer and adventurer whose Pacific expeditions helped ignite the world's curiosity about Easter Island, thought the statues had been created by pre-Inca from Peru, not by Polynesians. Erich von Däniken, the best-selling Swiss author of *Chariots of the Gods*, was sure the moai were built by stranded extraterrestrials. Modern science—linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence—has proved the moai builders were Polynesian but not how they moved their creations. Researchers have tended to assume the ancestors dragged the statues somehow, using a lot of ropes and wood. “The experts can say whatever they want,” says Suri Tuki, 25, José Tuki's half brother. “But we know the truth. The statues walked.” In the Rapanui oral tradition, the moai were animated by *mana*, a spiritual force transmitted by powerful ancestors.

There are no reports of moai building after Europeans arrived in the 18th century. By then Easter Island had only a few scrawny trees. In the 1970s and 1980s, though, biogeographer John Flenley of New Zealand's Massey University found evidence—pollen preserved in lake sediments—that the

island had been covered in lush forests, including millions of giant palm trees, for thousands of years. Only after the Polynesians arrived around A.D. 800 had those forests given way to grasslands.

Jared Diamond drew heavily on Flenley's work for his assertion in *Collapse*, his influential 2005 book, that ancient Easter Islanders committed unintentional ecocide. They had the bad luck, Diamond argues, to have settled an extremely fragile island—dry, cool, and remote, which means it's poorly fertilized by windblown dust or volcanic ash. (Its own volcanoes are quiescent.) When the islanders cleared the forests for firewood and farming, the forests didn't grow back. As wood became scarce and the islanders could no longer build seagoing canoes for fishing, they ate the birds. Soil erosion decreased their crop yields. Before Europeans showed up, the Rapanui had descended into civil war and cannibalism. The collapse of their isolated civilization, Diamond writes, is “the clearest example of a society that destroyed itself by overexploiting its own resources” and “a worst-case scenario for what may lie ahead of us in our own future.”

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The one-room house that José Antonio Tuki built on Easter Island for himself and his Belgian girlfriend, Joyce Verbaenen, has electricity but no indoor plumbing. The ocean is only steps away.

The moai, he thinks, accelerated the self-destruction. Diamond interprets them as power displays by rival chieftains who, trapped on a remote little island, lacked other ways of strutting their stuff. They competed by building ever bigger statues. Diamond thinks they laid the moai on wooden sledges, hauled over log rails—a technique successfully tested by UCLA archaeologist Jo Anne Van Tilburg, director of the Easter Island Statue Project—but that required both a lot of wood and a lot of people. To feed the people, even more land had to be cleared. When the wood was gone and civil war began, the islanders began toppling the moai. By the 19th century none were standing. Easter Island’s landscape acquired the aura of tragedy that, in the eyes of Diamond and many others, it retains today.

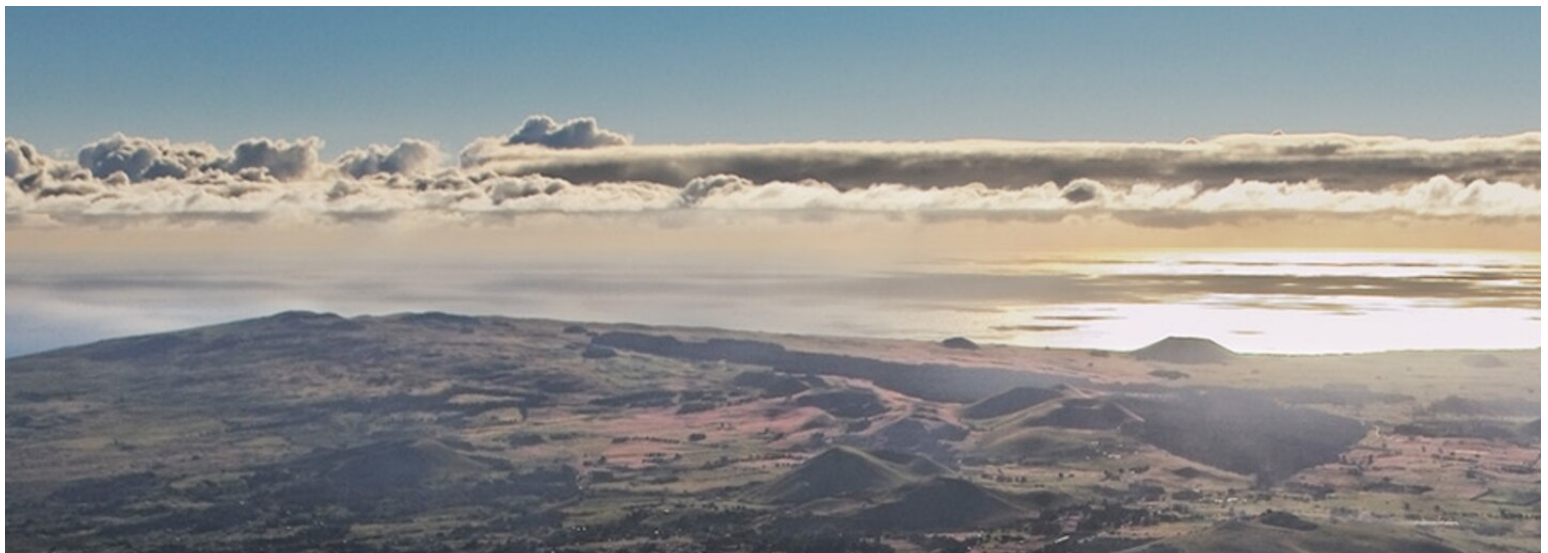
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Rearrange and reinterpret the scattered shards of fact, though, and you get a more optimistic vision of the Rapa Nui past—that of archaeologists Terry Hunt of the University of Hawaii and Carl Lipo of California State University Long Beach, who have studied the island for the past decade. It’s a vision peopled by peaceful, ingenious moai builders and careful stewards of the land. Hunt and Lipo agree that Easter Island lost its lush forests and that it was an “ecological catastrophe”—but the islanders themselves weren’t to blame. And the moai certainly weren’t. There is indeed much to learn from Easter Island, Hunt says, “but the story is

different.”

His and Lipo’s controversial new version, based on their research and others’, begins with their own excavation at Anakena beach. It has convinced them that the Polynesians didn’t arrive until A.D. 1200, about four centuries later than is commonly understood, which would leave them only five centuries to denude the landscape. Slashing and burning wouldn’t have been enough, Hunt and Lipo think. Anyway, another tree killer was present. When archaeologists dig up nuts from the extinct Easter Island palm, the nuts are often marred by tiny grooves, made by the sharp teeth of Polynesian rats.

The rats arrived in the same canoes as the first settlers. Abundant bones in the Anakena dig suggest the islanders dined on them, but otherwise the rodents had no predators. In just a few years, Hunt and Lipo calculate, they would have overrun the island. Feasting on palm nuts, they would have prevented the reseedling of the slow-growing trees and thereby doomed Rapa Nui’s forest, even if humans hadn’t been slashing and burning. No doubt the rats ate birds’ eggs too.





Three volcanoes, quiet now, formed Easter Island half a million years ago. It has three crater lakes but no streams; fresh water is scarce. Chile, the island's source of fuel and most food, is 2,150 miles away.

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Of course, the settlers bear responsibility for bringing the rats; Hunt and Lipo suspect they did so intentionally. (They also brought chickens.) But like invasive species today, the Polynesian rats did more harm to the ecosystem than to the humans who transported them. Hunt and Lipo see no evidence that Rapanui civilization collapsed when the palm forest did; based on their own archaeological survey of the island, they think its population grew rapidly after settlement to around 3,000 and then remained more or less stable until the arrival of Europeans.

Cleared fields were more valuable to the Rapanui than palm forests were. But they were wind-lashed, infertile fields watered by erratic rains. Easter Island was a tough place to make a living. It required heroic efforts. In farming, as in moai moving, the islanders shifted monumental amounts of rock—but into their fields, not out. They built thousands of circular stone windbreaks, called *manavai*, and gardened inside them. They mulched whole fields with broken volcanic rocks to keep the soil moist and fertilized it with nutrients that the volcanoes were no longer spreading. In short, Hunt, Lipo, and others contend, the prehistoric Rapanui were pioneers of sustainable farming, not inadvertent perpetrators of ecocide. “Rather than a case of abject failure, Rapa Nui is an unlikely story of success,” Hunt and Lipo argue in their recent book.

It's called *The Statues That Walked*, and the Rapanui enjoy better spin in it than they do in *Collapse*. Hunt and Lipo don't trust oral history accounts of violent conflict among the Rapanui; sharp obsidian flakes that other archaeologists see as weapons, they see as farm tools. The moai helped keep the peace, they argue, not only by signaling the power of their builders but also by limiting population growth: People raised statues rather than children. What's more, moving the moai required few people and no wood, because they were walked upright. On that issue, Hunt and Lipo say, evidence supports the folklore.

Sergio Rapu, 63, a Rapanui archaeologist and former Easter Island governor who did graduate work with Hunt, took his American colleagues to the ancient quarry on Rano Raraku, the island's southeastern volcano. Looking at the many moai abandoned there in various stages of completion, Rapu explained how they were engineered to walk: Fat bellies tilted them forward, and a D-shaped base allowed handlers to roll and rock them side to side. Last year, in experiments funded by National Geographic's Expeditions Council, Hunt and Lipo showed that as few as 18 people could, with three strong ropes and a bit of practice, easily maneuver a 10-foot, 5-ton moai replica a few hundred yards. In real life, walking miles with much larger moai would have been a tense business. Dozens of fallen statues line the roads leading away from the quarry. But many more made it to their platforms intact.

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The ancient statues known as moai are everyday sights on Easter Island, or Rapa Nui—native dancers in body paint, less so. Some 2,000 Rapanui live on the island, which belongs to Chile. They numbered only 111 in 1877, after slave traders and disease had decimated the population.

No one knows for sure when the last statue was carved. The moai cannot be dated directly. Many were still standing when the Dutch arrived in 1722, and Rapanui civilization was peaceful and thriving then, Hunt and Lipo argue. But the explorers introduced deadly diseases to which islanders had no immunity, along with artifacts that replaced the moai as status symbols. Snatching Europeans' hats—Hunt and Lipo cite many reports of this—became more appealing than hoisting a multiton red pukao onto a moai. In the 19th century slave traders decimated the population, which shriveled to 111 people by 1877.

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As Hunt and Lipo tell it, Easter Island's story is a parable of genocide and culturecide, not ecocide. Their friend Sergio Rapu buys some but not all of it. "Don't tell me those obsidian tools were just for agriculture," he says,

laughing. “I’d love to hear that my people never ate each other. But I’m afraid they did.”



Victor Ika, a Rapanui impresario, takes a break at home while waiting for tourists to arrive at his restaurant and performance center next door. His three children are watching Ben 10, an American cartoon. Ika wears face paint for ceremonial dances and meals; he makes i...[Read More](#)

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Today islanders confront a fresh challenge: exploiting their cultural legacy without wrecking it. A growing population and thousands of tourists are straining a limited water supply. The island lacks a sewer system and a place to put the swelling volume of trash; between 2009 and mid-2011 it shipped 230 tons to the mainland. “So what do we do?” asks Zasso Paoa, the mayor. “Limit migration? Limit tourism? That’s where we are now.” The island recently started asking tourists to take their trash home with them in their suitcases.

Tourists are forbidden to touch moai, but horses happily rub against them, wearing away the porous tuff. Though cars are now the preferred mode of transport, more than 6,000 horses and cattle—“more than people,” grumbles tour guide Atán—still run free, trampling ground once trodden by Scottish-owned sheep and relieving themselves on once sacred platforms. But the islanders’ own desire to develop their ancestral lands may be a greater threat to their densely packed heritage: more than 20,000 archaeological features in all, including walled gardens and stone chicken houses as well as moai and ahu. More than 40 percent of the

have to learn that archaeology isn't their enemy," says Rapu.

Decades ago he himself helped get the moai at Anakena back upright. In the process he and his colleagues also discovered how the moai builders had breathed soul into their colossal statues after the long trek from the quarry: As a finishing touch, they placed eyes of white coral and pupils of obsidian or red scoria into the empty sockets.





Isolated no more, seductive but not easy, Rapa Nui holds its people. José Tuki (at left, with girlfriend, Joyce) moved to Chile, but only for four years. “If you go away,” he says, “the island will call you back.”

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A grove of coconut palms, imported from Tahiti, overlooks Anakena beach today, reassuring sunbathers and Chilean newlyweds that they really are in Polynesia, even if the wind is shrieking and the grassy rolling hills behind them look like the Scottish Highlands. The moai are eyeless now and not confiding—to the tourists, José Tuki, or anyone else—how they got there or

which story of Easter Island is true. Tuki, for one, can handle the ambiguity. “I want to know the truth,” he says. “But maybe the island doesn’t tell all its answers. And maybe knowing everything would take its power away.” 🟡

Hannah Bloch was a Pakistan correspondent for *Time* before joining the *Geographic* as an editor. Randy Olson has shot 27 features, including ones on war-torn Sudan and Congo’s Mbuti Pygmies.

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